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AUTHOR Johannesen, Richard L.
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ABSTRACT

When Democratic Senator William Proxmire attacked the Bicentennial Youth Debates, jointly sponsored by the Speech Communication Association (SCA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), for fiscal wastefulness, SCA president Lloyd Bitzer offered a public rebuttal to the charge. The three major standards of ethicality and responsibility used to condemn Proxmire's charges were factual accuracy, thoroughness, and fairness. Through a parallel structure that cited a Proxmire charge followed by a refutation, the rebuttal pointed out four fundamental inaccuracies in Proxmire's stand. Thoroughness, as a standard of responsible governmental communication, was applied to generalizations, incomplete statements of fact, and unsupported evidence. The criterion of fairness was used to assess the honesty of Proxmire's method, in that he obtained information under false pretenses. These standards are appropriate criteria for assessing the degree of responsibility in Proxmire's action because they represent the avowed standards for responsible communication as stated in the SCA Credo, and because these same standards have been included by several philosophers and scholars in their individual discussions of ethically responsible communication. (MAI)

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Senator Proxmire Versus the Speech Communication Association: Appropriate Standards for Responsible Governmental Communication?

Richard L. Johannesen
Department of Speech Communication
Northern Illinois University

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SENATOR PROXMIRE VERSUS THE SPEECH COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION:
APPROPRIATE STANDARDS FOR RESPONSIBLE GOVERNMENTAL COMMUNICATION?

The colorful prose of Newsweek magazine provides some background needed to understand the attack of Democratic Senator William Proxmire on the Bicentennial Youth Debates operated by the Speech Communication Association and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.[1]

> . . . the four term senior senator from Wisconsin has become the U.S. Senate's senior gadfly on issues that range from aid to cities to regulations for banks. . . . Proxmire's critics call him a prig, a showboat and a headline grabber. . . . To tickle pinchpenny Wisconsin voters, he invented a Golden Fleece Award, which he bestowed upon such Federal boondoggles as a $50,000 research grant to NASA to study jaw clenching and a Southern Illinois University project to measure the effect of marijuana and blue movies on the sexual response of college men. But he was also a prime mover in serious Senate fights against the SST and the B-1 bomber and for a truth-in-lending law to regulate the banking industry.

Starting in March, 1975, Sen. Proxmire each month has issued a press statement announcing his Golden Fleece Award "given to the biggest, most ridiculous or most ironic example of government spending or waste."[2] In January, 1976, Proxmire presented his Golden Fleece Award to the National Endowment for the Humanities for its sponsorship of a summer seminar program "for well-heeled doctors, lawyers and school administrators to attend tuition-free, vacation-like, month-long humanistic bull sessions. . . ." In March, 1976, his Fleece Award went to the National Science Foundation for supporting a study of "environmental determinants of human aggression," a study which examined the effects of sexual arousal, humor, and empathy on amount of horn honking by impatient auto drivers.

Also in March, 1976, Sen. Proxmire's office issued a statement to be released after 6:30 am on Monday, March 22. Actually it was released on Sunday, March 21, and reported in the Monday newspapers.[3] This statement alleged fiscal wastefulness in the Bicentennial Youth Debates jointly sponsored by the S.C.A. and N.E.H. But the statement was neither meant to be nor labeled as a Golden Fleece Award.[4] Nevertheless, the account in the Washington Star did remind readers at some length of the Fleece award bestowed on the N.E.H. in January. Let me read the complete contents of the statement from Sen. Proxmire's office.

OFFICE OF

SENATOR WILLIAM PROXMIRE

WISCONSIN

FOR RELEASE AFTER 6:30 A.M. MONDAY, MARCH 22, 1976

Senator William Proxmire (D-Wis) charged Monday that "The National Endowment for the Humanities and the Speech Communication Association squandered $2 million on overhead costs for the Bicentennial Youth Debates while the substance of the program was starved for funds. The effect was that the bureaucrats took care of themselves while the students were left out in the cold."

Proxmire is Chairman of the Senate Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee and the Joint Economic Committee's Subcommittee on Priorities and Economy in Government.

The National Endowment for the Humanities is an $86 million a year federal agency which subsidizes research, education and public activities in the humanities. The Speech Communication Association, which is responsible for organizing and managing the Debates, is an organization made up of teachers and others working in speech and speech-related areas.

"The National Endowment gave the national office of the Speech Association $2 million as 'support for its basic administrative structure' while the Association hoped to raise $1.5 million for use as 'educational awards' to the young people who successfully competed in the debates. But hope, which makes a good breakfast, is a sorry supper—only $150 thousand were raised for the young people despite the $2 million expense for the bureaucratic overhead.

"The Debates were started with much fanfare and a Presidential endorsement. As a result, many unpaid volunteers helped the Association organize the Debates nationwide on a local, district, sectional and regional basis.

"Young people who win at the local level go on to compete at the district level and so on until eight regional winners are selected.

"The 'educational awards' for the winners were a prominently displayed drawing card for the debates. The first three finishers in each debate at the sectional and regional level were to receive the cash 'educational awards.' The Association even wrote model press releases for use at the local level which stated 'Students will be competing for medals and the right to go on to the Sectional contest, where educational awards will be presented to outstanding participants.'

"Unfortunately, there was a footnote which warned that 'Educational awards are contingent upon current BYD (Bicentennial Youth Debates) private sector fund raising efforts.' These efforts were a spectacular failure notwithstanding energetic appeals to a number of large corporations and foundations. Instead of the $1.5 million which would have been required to meet their commitments to young people, the Association has raised approximately $150 thousand.

"Because of this failure, there will be no cash awards at the sectional debates, and those at the regional level have been drastically slashed. For example, the advertised $6,000 regional first prize has been cut to a $1,000 savings bond.

"The National Endowment, when questioned about this failure, responded that 'The project from its very early planning stage was meant to be an opportunity for young Americans to study the nation's heritage and present their considered opinions in the form of speeches, extemporaneous talks, or through debate. The project designers have been committed not just to a series of contests but to the community and its active participation in the Bicentennial.'

"In other words, the money was not really important; it was the chance to learn and to participate in the Bicentennial.

"While I agree that all students who participate in these Debates will learn something and while some may not need the money, I feel certain that some were counting on the awards to help pay for their education—and they are going to be disappointed.

"Of course, the indifferent attitude toward the money does not apply to those in the National Endowment and the Speech Association who are administering the Debates. Their pay and perquisites are assured by the taxpayer.

"If this is an example of what we can expect during the Bicentennial Celebration, we may be in for a long, long summer."

# # # # # #

This is a verbatim copy of the release from Senator Proxmire's Office.

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Officials of the S.C.A. were quick to respond to these charges. Public rebuttals were immediately issued, soon collected for publication in a seven page unnumbered booklet, and mailed to all S.C.A. members along with the April, 1976, issue of Spectra, the official association newsletter. Following a cover letter from S.C.A. President Lloyd Bitzer and a verbatim copy of Proxmire's news release, the booklet reprinted the rebuttal statements from the National Endowment for the Humanities, from Richard Huseman, Director of the B.Y.D., from William Work, Executive Secretary of S.C.A., and from President Bitzer.

The issue I will explore here is not whether Proxmire was responsible and ethical in his attacks. Rather I will probe the nature and appropriateness of the standards explicitly and implicitly employed by S.C.A. and N.E.H. officials in their judgment of the responsibleness of his attacks. I will not be assessing the ultimate truth or falsity of his charges. My question is, did our representatives employ appropriate criteria to evaluate the ethicality of Proxmire's statement? This seems a natural question, given the formal commitment of our association to the promotion of ethically responsible communication by citizens generally and by government in particular. In December, 1972, our association adopted a Credo for Free and Responsible Communication in a Democratic Society.[5] And for some years our association has had a standing Committee on Accountability and Responsibility in Governmental Communication.[6]

That S.C.A. and N.E.H. officials were judging the ethical responsibility of Proxmire's charges, and of the investigation on which they were based, is clear from the language of Pres. Bitzer's formal rebuttal. He felt that Proxmire's actions contradict the "principles of responsiblity in government which the Senator claims to uphold." Proxmire's approval of the investigatory procedures and of the statement of charges, said Bitzer, injures "the cause of responsible government."

An analysis of the responses to Proxmire's attack by S.C.A. and N.E.H. officials indicates that three major standards of ethicality and responsibility were used to condemn Proxmire's investigation and charges. First, factual accuracy. Statements were

alleged to be innacurate, to not square with the facts of the situation. Second, thoroughness. Statements were alleged to be based on incomplete information or on inadequate gathering of information. Third, fairness. Statements allegedly reflected an investigation which reached conclusions too soon, or which was not candid in its purposes, or which did not afford a preliminary rebuttal opportunity prior to the public statement by Proxmire.

Factual Accuracy

In contending that "the Senator's criticisms are based on some fundamental misconceptions," Bitzer in his cover letter indicated three erroneous implications he believed Proxmire made. Bitzer replied to each implication with the phrase, "the fact is," and detailed exactly how he felt the charge was erroneous. Clearly Bitzer faulted Proxmire for being irresponsible through innacuracy. As the primary standard for judging the ethical responsibility of Proxmire's charges, Richard Huseman used their degree of accuracy. Huseman characterized Proxmire's statement as an "inaccurate reflection" of B.Y.D. programs and presented four "examples of inaccuracies." Huseman organized his reply through the parallel structure of repeating a Proxmire charge and following it at length with the facts he believed refuted that charge.

The N.E.H. statement of rebuttal also employed the criterion of accuracy. It aimed to correct several "fundamental inaccuracies." One fact, which the Endowment said was known to the Senator, was that, under existing legislation, the N.E.H. cannot directly provide educational scholarships. Another fact, in contrast to Proxmire's claim that the contingency of awards on successful fundraising efforts appeared only in a footnote, was that the contingency was "made clear from the earliest planning stages" and that B.Y.D. literature stated this in "unmistakable and prominent language."

Thoroughness

In his cover letter, Bitzer used the criterion of thoroughness to criticize an alleged fourth "fundamental misconception" expressed by Proxmire. To Proxmire's assertion that S.C.A. and N.E.H. squandered funds, Bitzer said the assertion ignored relevant

information, namely the successful distribution of materials and establishment of school programs, and the massive, serious attempt at raising funds for the educational awards. Bitzer also provided explanations for the modest fundraising results: the poor state of the economy and the fact that many foundations and corporations already had committed funds to other Bicentennial projects.

Because he felt that the replies by Huseman, Work, and the N.E.H. "effectively" refuted the various charges and factual mistakes in Proxmire's statement, in his formal rebuttal Bitzer concentrated his lengthy assessment on the "character" of the "heart of the matter" -- the thoroughness of the investigation and resulting statement. Proxmire was guilty, said Bitzer, of a "hasty and superficial judgment," and his charges were made "without careful study and without discussions with appropriate parties." Bitzer then itemized nine sets of facts, eight of which detailed the incomplete, superficial, and brief investigation conducted by but one aide in Proxmire's office. (The nine sets of facts are reproduced in their complete form in Appendix A.)

The Humanities Endowment statement questioned the responsibleness of Proxmire's charges because they lacked a thorough grounding in relevant information. Proxmire's information, according to N.E.H., overlooked the facts that the B.Y.D. was given free usage of public and private facilities for events, was donated time by over 12,600 sectional, district, and local coordinators, was given voluntary services of citizens to serve as judges and discussants, and was able to have about 9,900 schools participate. William Work, in his brief rebuttal, questioned the thoroughness of the information-gathering which preceded Proxmire's news release. Work noted that Proxmire failed to contact either Lloyd Bitzer, as President, or him, as Executive Secretary. And Work's office, he dryly observed, was conveniently close in "nearby" Falls Church, Virginia.

Thoroughness, as a standard for responsible governmental communication, was applied by Huseman at several points. Proxmire was chastized for belittling the $150,000 raised for educational awards while not providing more complete information to put that figure in context. Proxmire, said Huseman, provided no examples of other scholarship programs

which had matched that figure for the Bicentennial. And Proxmire did not "take the care to point out" that all funds for educational awards received from the private sector went directly for those awards with none of it utilized for overhead.

Fairness

Huseman employed fairness as a criterion to assess the responsibleness of Proxmire's attack. Huseman castigated Bob Mauney, Proxmire's aide, for calling Huseman's office to ask questions about the B.Y.D., for assuring him that Proxmire felt the program was one of the better Bicentennial programs he had seen, and for indicating that Proxmire wanted to help the B.Y.D. -- all without revealing that the Senator was "conducting any sort of investigation."

While thoroughness was Bitzer's primary standard for judging the responsibility of Proxmire's statement, Bitzer also questioned the ethicality of Proxmire's investigation and charges in light of the fairness criterion. Bitzer argued that the "investigative methods" and the "resulting press statement" lacked "fair and judicious judgment." Specifically, Bitzer contended that it was unfair for Proxmire or his aide to avoid indicating to anyone during the inquiry that they "were preparing a broadside to be released in the Senator's name." It was unfair, believed Bitzer, for Proxmire not to inform the main parties attacked of the charges and allow them "an opportunity to correct errors of fact or interpretation." Finally, Bitzer found it unfair that Proxmire's statement "prejudges the value of an unfinished project. . . ." (The debates were still in progress at the time of Proxmire's attack.)

Appropriateness of Standards

Are the standards of accuracy, thoroughness, and fairness appropriate criteria for assessing the degree of responsibleness in the communication of a governmental representative? I would say yes on two counts. First, in light of the S.C.A.s avowed standards for responsible communication. Second, in the context of what elsewhere I have identified as a "political perspective" for evaluating commuication ethics.[7]

The S.C.A. Credo for Free and Responsible Communication in a Democratic Society supports the following elements as essential for responsible public communication: accuracy, reasoning based on evidence, being well informed, and preciseness. Thus accuracy, as an appropriate standard, is explicit in the Credo. Thoroughness in information-gathering is supported in the elements of reasoning based on evidence and of being well informed. Only the standard of fairness is not made explicit. But elsewhere in the Credo the principle of fairness is supported through admonitions to promote equal opportunity for argument in public controversies.

While preciseness is advocated in the Credo as a mark of responsible communication, the S.C.A. respondents did not criticize one part of Proxmire's statement that seemed to invite application of that standard. At one point the Proxmire news release stated: "The National Endowment gave the national office of the Speech Association $2 million as 'support for its basic administrative structure' . . . ." To me it seems that the exact referent for the word "its" is ambiguous. The word "its" could refer either to S.C.A. or to the B.Y.D. program. In fact, this ambiguity allowed the N.E.H. response to charge that Proxmire "mistakenly" claimed that the $2 million went to support the S.C.A.s basic administrative structure. Proxmire may have meant, but not have clearly stated, the basic administrative structure of the B.Y.D. program. But S.C.A. respondents did not use the standard of preciseness suggested in their association Credo to fault Proxmire for an irresponsible lack of clarity.

A political perspective for assessing communication ethics examines the ideology of a particular political-governmental system (method of governing) to identify the explicit and implicit values and procedures generally accepted as crucial to the health and growth of that system. Once these values are identified for a political system, they can be used as standards for evaluating the ethics of communication within that system. The assumption is that public communication should foster achievement of these values. Communication which retards or undermines these basic political values could be condemned as unethical.

Within the context of American representative democracy, for example, various analysts have pinpointed values and procedures they deem fundamental to optimum functioning of our political system, and, thus, values that can guide ethical scrutiny of political-governmental communication. Such values and procedures might include: enhancement of citizen capacity to reach rational decisions, access to relevant and accurate information, honesty in presenting motivations and consequences, and fairness in presenting evidence and alternatives.

Among the four "moralities" suggested by Karl R. Wallace as an ethical basis for communication are a thorough knowledge of the subject, the fair selection and presentation of information, and revelation of actual motivations.[8] Thomas R. Nilsen argues that the ethical communicator presents information which is complete as possible under the circumstances, reveals his or her actual motivations and goals, and does not lead receivers "to believe that they are getting a more complete and accurate picture than they are."[9] Included in the ten "ground rules" advocated by philosopher Sidney Hook as ethical guidelines for scrutinizing communication on controversial public issues is the admonition that "anyone involved in a controversy has an intellectual responsibility to inform himself of the available facts."[10] And several other discussions of standards for ethically responsible communication include the criteria that communicators ought not to conceal their real motivations or purposes and that they should avoid being inaccurate through distortion of facts.[11] All in all, the standards of accuracy, thoroughness, and fairness seem strongly advocated by scholars taking a political perspective to judging communication ethics.

What has become known within official S.C.A. circles as The Proxmire Affair does provide an interesting case study of how criteria of ethical responsibility actually have been applied in assessing governmental communication. Obviously we may wish to allow for the fact that it was the S.C.A.s own ox that was being gored by Proxmire. But then, what more natural circumstances for the association to exercise its commitment to monitor the responsibility of governmental communication? In this instance above all, we should have responded by applying relevant and appropriate standards. In my judgment the standards actually used were relevant and appropriate.

(1) The investigation, leading to these most serious charges, occurred during the brief period of one week and was conducted by one person, an aide to Senator Proxmire, who reports that he worked about 40 hours at the task.

(2) What did the inquiry consist of? Senator Proxmire's aide made a few phone calls—to NEH and to the BYD national office. He read some documents prepared for BYD participants—the *BYD Issue Annalysis*, the *BYD Guide*, as well as miscellaneous pamphlets. He asked for and received information from NEH and BYD regarding the size and composition of the budget, fund-raising activities, and educational awards.

(3) Neither Senator Proxmire nor his aide ever contacted the Speech Communication Association, although its national office is in Falls Church, Virginia, no more than 20 minutes from the Senator's office. At no time during the inquiry did the Senator or his aide contact the president of the association or any of its officers.

(4) The Senator's aide never interviewed a single young person who had participated in the youth debate program. He did not interview any of the persons directing local, district, sectional, or regional events. He did not attend any BYD event. He did not even take the time to visit the BYD national office in Washington, D.C. and, in fact, confused it with the national Speech Communication Association office in Falls Church, Virginia.

(5) The Senator's aide did not carefully examine the grant proposals or take the time to study the budget details of the BYD project in order to understand just how funds were used, although he and Senator Proxmire appear convinced that all grant monies were "squandered."

(6) Neither the Senator nor his aide interviewed the project director, although Dr. Huseman requested, but never received, an opportunity to talk with Senator Proxmire. Nor did anyone in the Senator's office take the time to interview the Speech Communication Association's executive secretary or its president.

(7) Senator Proxmire's aide characterized his inquiry as "good investigative reporting." When I informed him that his investigation was inadequate, he replied that he had called a couple of friends who assured him that he had employed standard practices of "investigative reporting."

(8) At no time during this questionable inquiry did Senator Proxmire or his aide indicate to anyone concerned that they were preparing a broadside to be released in the Senator's name. Furthermore, the main parties accused of "squandering" two million dollars were never informed of the accusations by the Senator's office, nor given an opportunity to correct errors of fact and interpretation. These facts seem incredible, since the press release that was drafted, with Senator Proxmire's approval, makes grave accusations against our association and prejudges the value of an *unfinished* project involving years of work and the devoted efforts of several thousand people.

(9) Senator Proxmire's press statement may suggest to some readers that his Senate committees and investigative staffs were involved and that the Senator himself was the principal investigator. This is not so. The principal investigator was staff aide Robert Mauney, working under Senator Proxmire's supervision. The aide prepared a draft of the press statement, which the Senator's office revised and released. Senator Proxmire, who gave the authoritative sanction of his high office to the press statement, apparently played a minor role in the task of gathering and evaluating facts.

The investigative methods, and the resulting press statement by the Senator's office are lacking in fair and judicious judgment. The responsibility rests with Senator Proxmire, not with his staff aide alone. In lending the prestige of his congressional position to such investigative and journalistic tactics, Senator Proxmire hurts not only the cause of responsible government. He disheartens thousands of schools, teachers, students, and community citizens who have and are giving their time and talents to what may very well be one of the most substantial and worthwhile projects undertaken in this bicentennial year.

Lloyd F. Bitzer
6142 Vilas Hall
University of Wisconsin
Madison, Wisconsin 53706

Phone (608) 262-1947 or 262-3398
Home (608) 845-7876

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Footnotes

1. Tom Mathews, et. al., "The Loneliest Runner," Newsweek, March 13, 1978, p. 27.

2. Quotation of purpose stated at top of the compilations of Golden Fleece Awards for 1975, 1976, and 1977 issued by Sen. Proxmire's office.

3. For newspaper accounts of the statement see New York Times, March 22, 1976, p. 24M; Washington Post, March 22, 1976, p. B3; Washington Star, March 22, 1976, p. A-7.

4. Letter to the author from Sen. Proxmire, May 6, 1978.

5. Reprinted in Richard L. Johannesen, Ethics in Human Communication (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publ. Co., 1975; reprinted Wayne, N.J.: Avery Publishing Group, 1978), pp. 85-86.

6. See that committee's "Statement of Committee Policies and Principles," approved for publication by the S.C.A. Administrative Committee, April 1977, and printed in Spectra, XIII(August 1977), p. 9.

7. See Johannesen, Ethics in Human Communication, Chapter 3, for a more extensive discussion of various "political perspectives."

8. Karl R. Wallace, "An Ethical Basis of Communication," Speech Teacher, 4(January 1955), 1-9.

9. Thomas R. Nilsen, Ethics of Speech Communication, 2nd ed.(Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974), pp. 45, 72; Nilsen, "Democratic Ethics and the Hidden Persuaders," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 44(December 1958), 385-392.

10. Sidney Hook, "The Ethics of Controversy," The New Leader, February 1, 1954, pp. 12-14; Hook, "The Ethics of Political Controversy," in Donn W. Parson and Wil Linkugel, eds., The Ethics of Controversy (Lawrence, Kan.: The House of Usher, 1968), pp. 50-71.

11. Henry Lee Ewbank and J. Jeffery Auer, Discussion and Debate: Tools of a Democracy, 2nd ed.(New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1951), pp. 255-258; Wil A. Linkugel and E. Christian Buehler, Speech Communication for the Contemporary Student, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), pp. 30-36; Wayne C. Minnick, The Art of Persuasion, 2nd ed.(Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), pp. 278-287.